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AUTHOR Makarova, Veronica
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ABSTRACT

Class activities and games designed to stimulate student interest and provide feedback in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESOL) pronunciation and phonetics are described. They are intended to address specific challenges of a typical Japanese, ESOL classroom--low student motivation and inadequate feedback--and to supplement conventional language drills. It is noted that most vocabulary teaching games (crosswords, mazes, "hangman," bingo) can be adapted for pronunciation practice. Examples offered include: (1) an articulatory jigsaw puzzle; (2) a dialect identification game; (3) a ball game; (4) dart game and contest; (5) flash card games; (6) use of local children's; and (7) party games, and some student-produced ideas such as stories and dialogues, tongue-twisters, and limericks. (Contains 13 references.) (MSE)

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Fun Games and Activities for Pronunciation and Phonetics Classes at Universites
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Veronica Makarova

Contact address **before April 10, 1998**: Namiki 3-663, Tsukuba-shi, Ibaraki 305
Tel (home): 0298-567862
after April 10, 1999: Department of Applied Linguistics, University of Edinburgh, 14 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh EH8 9LN, UK

Fun Games and Activities for Pronunciation and Phonetics Classes at Universites
by Veronica Makarova
Meikai and Tsukuba Universities
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Abstract

The paper is devoted to problems of teaching English pronunciation and phonetics to university students in Japan. The author addresses the specific challenges of a typical Japanese university class: low motivation and low feedback.

The author believes that a prerequisite for the improvement in students' speech performance is enhancing students' motivation and interest towards English pronunciation and phonetics. This can be achieved by introducing amusing games and activities as a supplement to inevitable drills. While creating and selecting fun activities for students the author pursues the "discovery" approach which is aimed at making them discoverers of facts about language rather than just recipients of information.

The author introduces original pronunciation-teaching games and tasks that are divided into student-produced and teacher-produced activities. In particular, the author presents a jig-saw puzzle, darts and card games, as well as a dialect-guessing game.

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Fun Games and Activities for Pronunciation and Phonetics Classes at Universites

Introduction

Teaching phonetics and pronunciation is one of the greatest challenges in language teaching in any academic environment. A few factors in the teaching situation in Japan are particularly unfavourable for these subjects.

Pronunciation, maybe more than any other aspect of foreign language teaching, requires a close individual interaction between the teacher and the student. Such interaction is hardly possible in the typical Japanese university class, with very large groups and low feedback.

Japanese students are often sceptical about the possibility of progress in their pronunciation. They often feel self-conscious of their pronunciation, and too shy to practice their English. On the other hand, difficulties in pronunciation production and perception are also used to covert language incompetence. For example, my friend complained of a secretary at his department. Although she is supposed to be able to speak English she refused to communicate with him in English on the grounds that she had studied in New Zealand and is only good at comprehending New Zealand and Australian English. The paradox is that the foreigner is actually a New Zealander.

These dramatic circumstances of the English language education in Japan seem to be pointing at the necessity of putting more emphasis on phonetics and pronunciation training. Besides these specific Japanese factors there are some more universal arguments in favour of phonetics and pronunciation teaching that I would also like to consider.

Why Teach Phonetics and Pronunciation

1. Japanese students, as shown in a survey of students' opinions (Makarova & Ryan, 1997), believe that having good pronunciation and knowledge of English phonetics are important

qualities of an English language teacher; students' interest in learning pronunciation is higher than their interest in learning foreign culture or literature.

2. Fluency in pronunciation is vital to language processing. Performance in the second language can improve according to the speaking rate (Cook, 1996, p. 69). This phenomenon is caused by the so-called 'articulatory loop' in working memory, which is used for processing information. To keep the information from fading it must be repeated (articulated) every few seconds aloud or silently. To reduce the effect of the 'cognitive deficit' (mental processes are slower and less efficient in L2) and increase the students' memory span in L2 we have to teach them fluent pronunciation (Cook, 1996, p.72).

3. Social considerations also have to be accounted for: very poor pronunciation annoys native speakers, it often produces the impression of slovenly or uneducated speech.

4. Reasonably high pronunciation level is necessary for communication. Please, refer to the grotesque example reported in *The Japan Times* newspaper (21 June, 1997): a Japanese tourist intended to travel from London to Turkey. She found herself in Torquay instead, a small town in southwest England, at night, with a heavy suitcase and only Turkish money with her. "I kept saying 'Turkey, Turkey', but because of my pronunciation, they put me on a train to Torquay," was the Japanese lady quoted.

5. Language teaching methods nowadays put the emphasis on the consciousness-raising, language awareness or sensitization. If we make our students understand the articulatory mechanism, differences between phonological systems of their own and the studied language, the nature of their mispronunciations and the necessary directions of improvement, they can conscientiously work on their pronunciation. Thus teaching phonetics becomes essential in a big classroom where a teacher cannot work with each student individually. "Knowing a language implies knowledge of complex structures and procedures which is a necessary prerequisite of practical

performance," writes Steven Mc.Donough (1981, p.13).

6. After the 'critical age' it is difficult for people to acquire "authentic" (nativelike pronunciation). In early teens the "lateralization" process (assignment of brain functions to the left or right brain hemisphere) has been completed and less adaptive macroneural circuits responsible for pronunciation acquisition have matured (Brown, 1987, p.43, 44). The situation nevertheless does not seem hopeless for the adults. Although they have lost some learning abilities of children they have acquired new analytical abilities, and if we employ these abilities and appeal to them, it is possible to considerably improve the students' pronunciation. Just because it is very hard for grown-ups who no longer have a child's neuromuscular plasticity to acquire foreign language pronunciation naturally, they have to be taught how to manipulate their several hundred speech muscles in a new way.

7. Since aquiring a more authentic pronunciation is a muscular skill, like any other skill it requires practice and time to develop. Therefore students should be given adequate time to spend on their pronunciation practice.

8. In the light of Howard Gardner's theory of intelligence (Brown,1987, p.73) it is not only the skill, but intellect that we develop via pronunciation training. Of Gardner's seven kinds of intellect four kinds: linguistic, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, and logical can be developed in pronunciation training.

Prerequisites of successful instruction in the discovery approach

After we get convinced in the necessity of pronunciation and phonetics instruction the next question that needs to be addressed is how to make it more successful. The theory of instruction says that we have to

1. motivate students

2. structure the material so that it could be readily grasped by the learner

3. present materials in effective sequences (Brown, 1987, p.7).

Let us consider how to achieve these goals in view of the " discovery approach". It puts much emphasis on motivating students, encouraging their relative autonomy and making them "investigators of facts about language rather than just recipients of information" (Harmer, 1995, p.337). The application of discovery method has not been yet sufficiently developed for pronunciation and phonetics teaching (See Makarova, 1996).

The goal that I am trying to pursue in my teaching is not only improving students' pronunciation or stuffing into their heads some fundamentals of phonetics theory. I am trying to teach students how to think and extract necessary information from English language texts, make them interested in pronunciation and phonetics, and stimulate self-learning.

The model that I have worked out for myself includes the following items:

1. introducing self-learning "discover it yourself" activities in class

2. utilizing student-produced materials and activities

3. having fun

These three elements are, of course, not separate, they are integrated. Student-produced materials and teacher-produced materials can be of the "discovery type" and should preferably be amusing. Having fun does not necessarily mean having games, it can be incorporated into introducing new material or revising old one. Ideally students may understand that learning as such is amusing and gratifying.

Disovery method can be practiced through introducing some unusual material or making unexpected questions after having presented new material. Very often I offer follow-up quiz questions to the students including materials from languages other than English. I believe it

broadens students' outlook and enriches their perception. While studying English tones, for example, it is useful to compare them with the Chinese tones and Japanese pitch accents.

"At the heart of all thought and meaning and action is emotion" (Brown, p.49). Appealing to students' emotions and the artistic sense can be both educational and entertaining. I found showing parts of "My Fair Lady" musical in class very stimulating for the students. While introducing British vowels and IPA vowel chart I discuss with my students vowel colours and vowel images as described by Arthyr Rimbaud in his "Voyelles" ('a' black, 'e' white, 'I' red, 'u' green, 'o' blue), they come forward with their perceptions of British RP and Japanese vowel colours in comparison. "*English is Tough Stuff*", "*Is English the Hardest Language of All?*", Mark Twain's "*A Plan for the Improvement of English Spelling*" and other highly amusing texts can be used for practicing transcription and pronunciation skills.

Games

A very powerful (though not the only one) instrument of covering all the three earlier mentioned teaching directions is games.

The reasons for using games in a pronunciation class are obvious. Pronunciation is a part of language teaching, and using games in language teaching is a well established practice. Pronunciation games are offered by Joanne Kenworthy (1988), Martin Hewings (1993), Christiane Dalton and Barbara Seidlhofer (1994), Clement Laroy (1995), Mark Hancock (1997), and other pronunciation teaching experts.

The reasons for playing in a phonetics class are less obvious: students are hardly ever taught physics, sociology, or literature via games. I found using games in class beneficial for phonetics teaching for the following reasons:

1. Phonetics is closely linked with pronunciation language teaching, and while teaching phonetics we also hope to contribute to students practical language skills.

2. Games help to make memory chains and blocks for remembering information.

3. Games are a part of meaningful learning, many amusing activities can be geared towards self-learning.

4. Games create the mental state of disequilibrium, doubt, which is a prerequisite of the cognition. Games facilitate learning and provide nurturing context for it. Students learn and verify their knowledge in games.

5. Games can appeal to both logical thinking (Brown, 1987, p.47) and emotions of learners.

6. Japanese students like playing games.

7. Some games require physical action, and give a good chance for weak students to contribute to their teams' success, and enjoy the class.

Games examples

Most vocabulary teaching games - crosswords, mazes, "hangman", bingo can be matched to the needs of pronunciation and transcription teaching. A few original games are offered below.

1. Articulatory jig-saw puzzle

Understanding the mechanism of speech production is vital for pronunciation training. If students do not understand, for example, what the alveolar ridge is, it is hardly possible to expect correct articulation of alveolar sounds. Articulators are very hard for students to remember in English. I therefore designed a game that facilitates memorizing articulators via a jig-saw puzzle.

2. "Professor Higgins"

While talking about variants of English spoken around the world or British dialects I play cassettes with recordings of speakers of different dialects of English and ask my students to determine where these people come from, whether they are native or non-native English speakers, and write down peculiar features of their pronunciation.

3. Ball/balloon games

Many games can be played with a ball or a balloon. A sticker with a phoneme, syllable structure (CVC or VC, V, etc.), words in transcription, etc., can be attached to the ball or written on a baloon. Students through the ball to each other saying words/ phrases/utterances containing the item(s) on the ball. Groups can compete in 'clearing the ball' first.

4. Darts can be used effectively to practice the English vowel classification chart, when vowel labels are attached to the arrows and the dart board contains the vowel trapeze instead of the usual circles. This activity can be a part of a group contest. Another example: sounds

are very difficult for the Japanese students both in production and in perception. To practice them one student (students take turn) in a small group is given the task of saying a word with one of these sounds and the others have to hit one of the correspondingly marked three sections of a dart-board. Only safe darts without sharp points can be used in class.

5. Cards

The students are asked to make cards with the phonemes, rhythmical or stress patterns or tones, etc. At the back of each card the students are required to write down the key words illustrating the usage of each phonetic item under study (words that the students know well and would not mispronounce) in spelling and in phonetic transcription. The cards are used to signal to the teacher the sounds the students hear in the listening exercises.

Phonemic cards have been already suggested for usage, for example, by Bowen and Marks (1992). However, using the reverse side of the cards, making the cards to illustrate phenomena

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other than phonemes and the benefits of using the cards in large groups have not been specifically discussed earlier.

Advantages of the "phoneme cards" can be summarized in the following way:

-- students memorize the phonetic symbols while making the cards

-- students repeat the usage of the phoneme or other pronunciation unit each time they use the card

-- other students do not see whether the student is making a mistake or not while the student is showing the card to the teacher

-- the feedback the teacher gets when students answer by razing their cards can help him/her to observe which phonetic contrasts cause more difficulties and therefore need to be practiced more by the whole class and by individual students

--cards can be also used for games and fun activities.

Another kind of phonemic cards not having any inscriptions at the back can be used in a game of sorting out phonemes into vowels and consonants, vowels by labialization, consonants by the manner of production, etc.

A game of cards can be played when students try to make meaningful words using a set of phoneme cards in their hands or challenge each other to make examples with a phoneme or phonemic sequence putting down one card after another on the table.

6. Using local games

Some games that different nations play to have fun can be adapted for the needs of pronunciation and phonetics teaching. A Russian wedding banquet game that I personally found suitable for my phonetics class is called a "hedge-hog". A phoneme, intonation group, etc., is written on a fruit (mandarin orange is good), which is then pierced with about 10-20 toothpicks, and given to a group of students. Each student in turn has to say one characteristic or give an example of the item on the fruit, and if succeeding in doing so, the student takes one

toothpick out and gives the mandarin over to the next student. The last student to say something meaningful and take the last toothpick out gets both one point for his/her classroom activity and the mandarin.

In Japan, people enjoy playing many games at parties. These games can be adapted for pronunciation teaching. For example, "BOOM" game (clapping hands in turn on your own knees, then the knees of the neighbour on your right, then the neighbour on your left, then your own ones again, saying 'boom' at the last stage) can be used to practice rhythm.

Student-produced materials

All the activities discussed earlier have been "teacher-initiated" or "teacher-produced". Materials produced by the students can be also effective. Video-clips of the students' favourite films, stories and dialogues, poems, tongue-twisters or limericks written by the students can be included. It is amazing how creative students can be. Please, find examples of pronunciation tasks produced in class by second-year Meikai University English majors in the Appendix.

Conclusion

I tried to demonstrate that using games and amusing activities in phonetics and pronunciation classes can motivate students, make them active in class and consequently improve their pronunciation.To conclude, please, let me quote a language-teaching games propagate: 'the whole process of teaching and learning should be fun. This self-developing instruction can be enhanced by the use of games in the classroom' (Dorry, 1996).

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Appendix

Tasks designed by second-year Meikai University students

/ U: / AND / U/ PRACTICE

1. Luke is a junior high school teacher. He is usually in bad mood and looses his temper on Tuesdays. He often rebukes his students: "You are foolish!".

He is a nuisance, his only good point is his love of food and cooking. He goes to a cooking school where he met Judy. Judy is beautiful, they fell in love with each other and often go to movies.

One day they had a quarrel. Judy bullied Luke and Luke pushed her into a pool. Judy felt disgusted with Luke's gruesome behaviour. She had a secret love affair with William. Judy and William went to the Zoo. Luke found it out and bruised William. Luke is a foolish man and a brute.

2. One afternoon a woman went to a book store to buy a cookbook. She looked through many books in the store. It took her about two hours to find a suitable book. She paid for the book, and a shop-assistant in blue wrapped it beautifully. On her way home the woman thought how she would certainly become a good cook soon. As soon as she came home she opened her package. To her surprise she found that the book was not a cook-book, but a book of nude photographs.

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